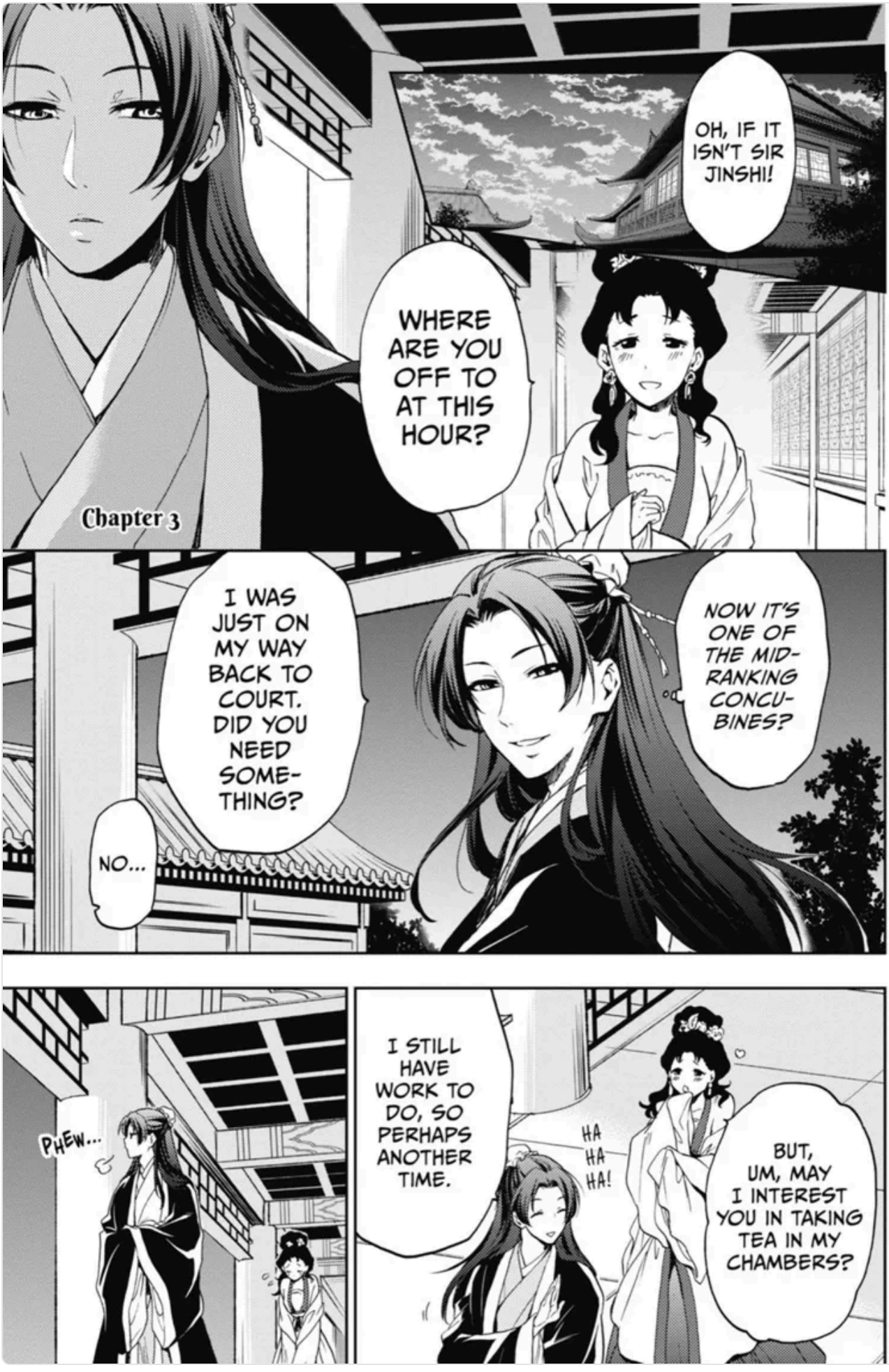
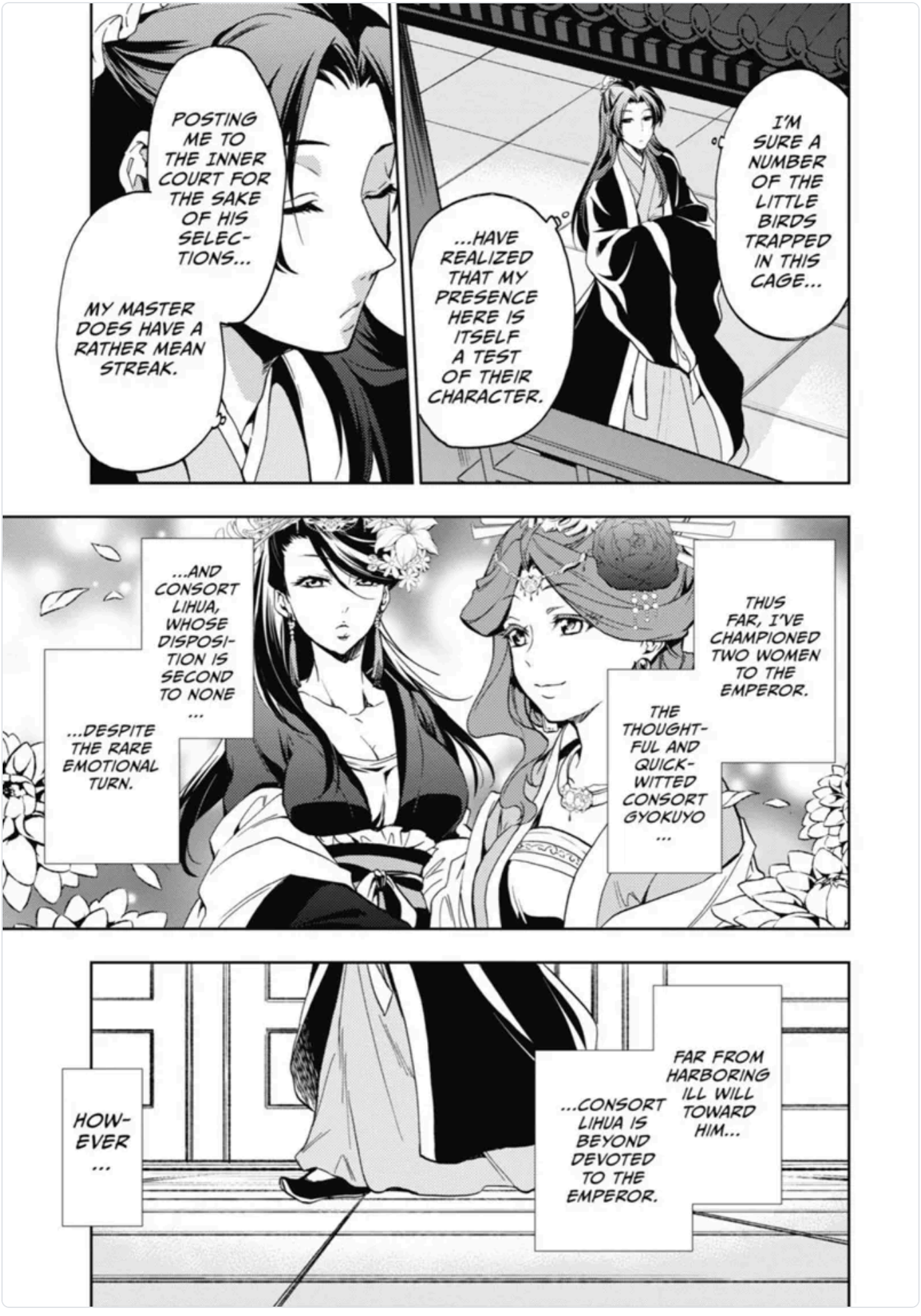
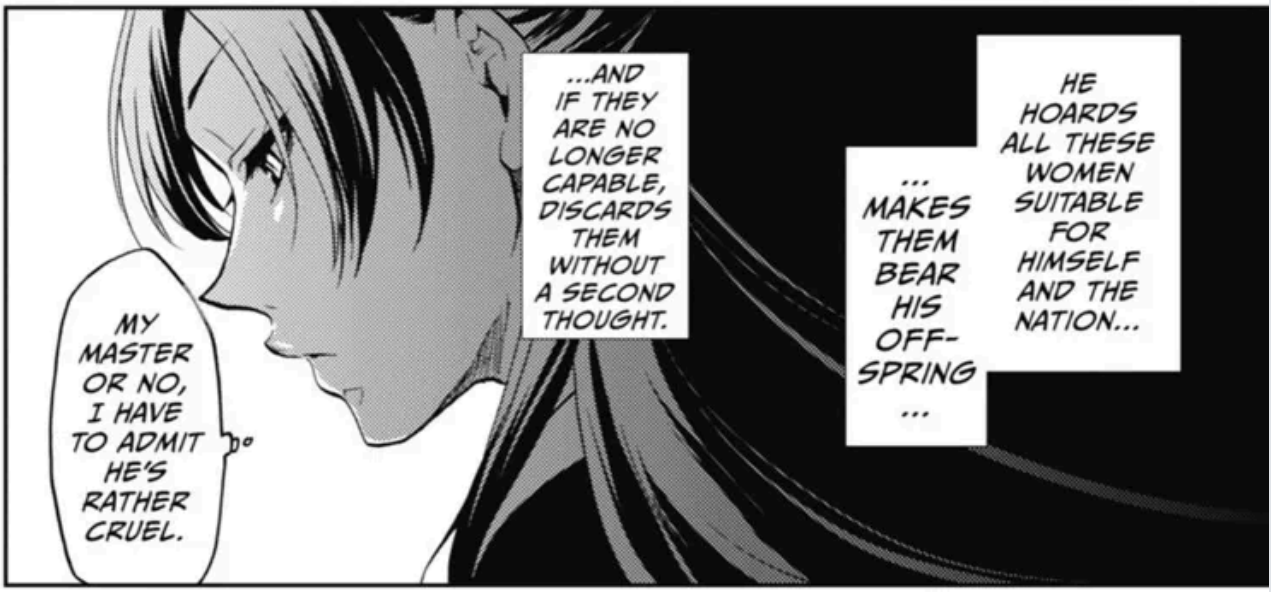

Chapter 3
OH, IF IT ISN'T SIR JINSHI!
WHERE ARE YOU OFF TO AT THIS HOUR?
I WAS JUST ON MY WAY BACK TO COURT. DID YOU NEED SOME-THING?
NO...
NOW IT'S ONE OF THE MID-RANKING CONCU-BINES?
PHEW...
I STILL HAVE WORK TO DO, SO PERHAPS ANOTHER TIME.
HA HA HA!
BUT, UM, MAY I INTEREST YOU IN TAKING TEA IN MY CHAMBERS?

...BEEN INVITED INTO THE PRIVATE CHAMBERS OF THREE CONCUBINES OF VARYING RANKS.
...GIVEN APHRODI-SIAC-TAINTED FOOD BY A SOLDIER, AND TO TOP IT ALL OFF...
IN THE COURSE OF ONE DAY HERE, I'VE BEEN PROPOSI-TIONED BY A CIVIL SERVANT ...
HOW VERY INSOLENT.
ATTEMPTING TO SEDUCE OTHER MEN BECAUSE THE EMPEROR WON'T VISIT THEM...
A CONCUBINE'S RANK IS DETERMINED BY HER LINEAGE, BEAUTY, AND INTELLI-GENCE.
OF THE THREE, INTELLI-GENCE IS THE MOST STRICTLY GRADED.
IN ADDITION TO AN EDUCATION APPROPRI-ATE TO AN EMPRESS, IT REQUIRES A SENSE OF VIRTUE.


I'M SURE A NUMBER OF THE LITTLE BIRDS TRAPPED IN THIS CAGE...
...HAVE REALIZED THAT MY PRESENCE HERE IS ITSELF A TEST OF THEIR CHARACTER.
POSTING ME TO THE INNER COURT FOR THE SAKE OF HIS SELEC-TIONS...
MY MASTER DOES HAVE A RATHER MEAN STREAK.
THUS FAR, I'VE CHAMPIONED TWO WOMEN TO THE EMPEROR.
THE THOUGHT-FUL AND QUICK-WITTED CONSORT GYOKUYO ...
...AND CONSORT LIHUA, WHOSE DISPOSI-TION IS SECOND TO NONE ...
...DESPITE THE RARE EMOTIONAL TURN.
FAR FROM HARBORING ILL WILL TOWARD HIM...
...CONSORT LIHUA IS BEYOND DEVOTED TO THE EMPEROR.
HOW-EVER ...

...WAS AFTER THE CROWN PRINCE'S PASSING.
THE LAST TIME THE EMPEROR VISITED CONSORT LIHUA, WHO HAS ALL BUT WASTED AWAY...
...CONSORT GYOKUYO WILL MOST LIKELY CONTINUE AS THE FAVORITE.


MY MASTER OR NO, I HAVE TO ADMIT HE'S RATHER CRUEL.
...AND IF THEY ARE NO LONGER CAPABLE, DISCARDS THEM WITHOUT A SECOND THOUGHT.
... MAKES THEM BEAR HIS OFF-SPRING ...
HE HOARDS ALL THESE WOMEN SUITABLE FOR HIMSELF AND THE NATION...

AH, THAT REMINDS ME... ONE OF THE MID-RANKING CONCUBINES IS TO BE BESTOWED UPON A MILITARY OFFICER.
...OR PASSED OFF TO OFFI-CIALS.
THOSE WHO ARE DEEMED UNWANTED ARE EITHER SENT BACK TO THEIR HOMES...

BUT TO DO SO, I MAY NEED TO PUT THAT HERBALIST TO MORE WORK YET...
ANYWAY, THERE SHOULD BE NO TROUBLE AS LONG AS I KEEP TO THE PLAN.
SHE JUST MIGHT TURN OUT TO BE MORE USEFUL THAN I COULD HAVE EVER IMAGINED.
I'M SURE SHE MEANS TO HIDE IT...
...BUT THE WAY SHE KEEPS GLANCING AT ME AS ONE MIGHT A CATER-PILLAR...
STAARE
I'VE CERTAINLY MET MANY BEFORE WHO'VE TAKEN NO CARNAL INTEREST IN ME...
...BUT SHE'S THE FIRST TO EVER LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT.
GRIN ニヤ
GRIN ニヤ

I FEEL LIKE I'VE DISCOVERED A NEW TOY TO PLAY WITH.
HEH!
HEH!
HEH!
I'M NO MASOCHIST, BUT I FIND HER STRANGELY INTRIGUING.
I DARESAY YOU CAN EXPECT A VISIT...
...FROM HIM TONIGHT.
カリ
GACHANK
ャ
ン
BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY...

Chapter 3 The Heavenly Maiden of the Court

ALL RIGHT. GOOD LUCK!
WELL, I'LL BE OFF!
THOUGH THE TERM "PANACEA" EXISTS...
...AN ACTUAL CURE FOR ALL ILLS DOES NOT.
SO MY FATHER TOLD ME.

BUT ACHIEVING THAT GOAL IS STILL A LONG WAY OFF.
...IN THE HOPES OF DEVELOPING A TRUE PANACEA.
TAKEN ABACK BY THIS, I BEGAN EXPERIMENTING ...
...BUT THIS TALK OF MAKING AN APHRODISIAC HAS PIQUED MY INTEREST.
CAN I TASK YOU WITH MAKING AN APHRODISIAC FOR ME?
DOING HIS BIDDING DOESN'T SIT WELL WITH ME AT ALL...
...AND HE'S WITH...
URK!
IT'S THAT QUACK DOCTOR!
WE'VE BEEN AWAITING YOUR ARRIVAL.
PHYSICIAN

HELLO, MISS MAOMAO.
MY NAME IS GAO SHUN.
ON A TYPICAL DAY, I AM SIR JINSHI'S AIDE.
DOOM
IS HE A MILI-TARY MAN ...?
I AM PLEASED TO MAKE YOUR ACQUAIN-TANCE.
UNLIKELY... SEEING AS HE'S HERE IN THE INNER COURT, HE MUST BE A EUNUCH.
BOW
AS AM I.
THIS WAY, IF YOU PLEASE.
THANK YOU.

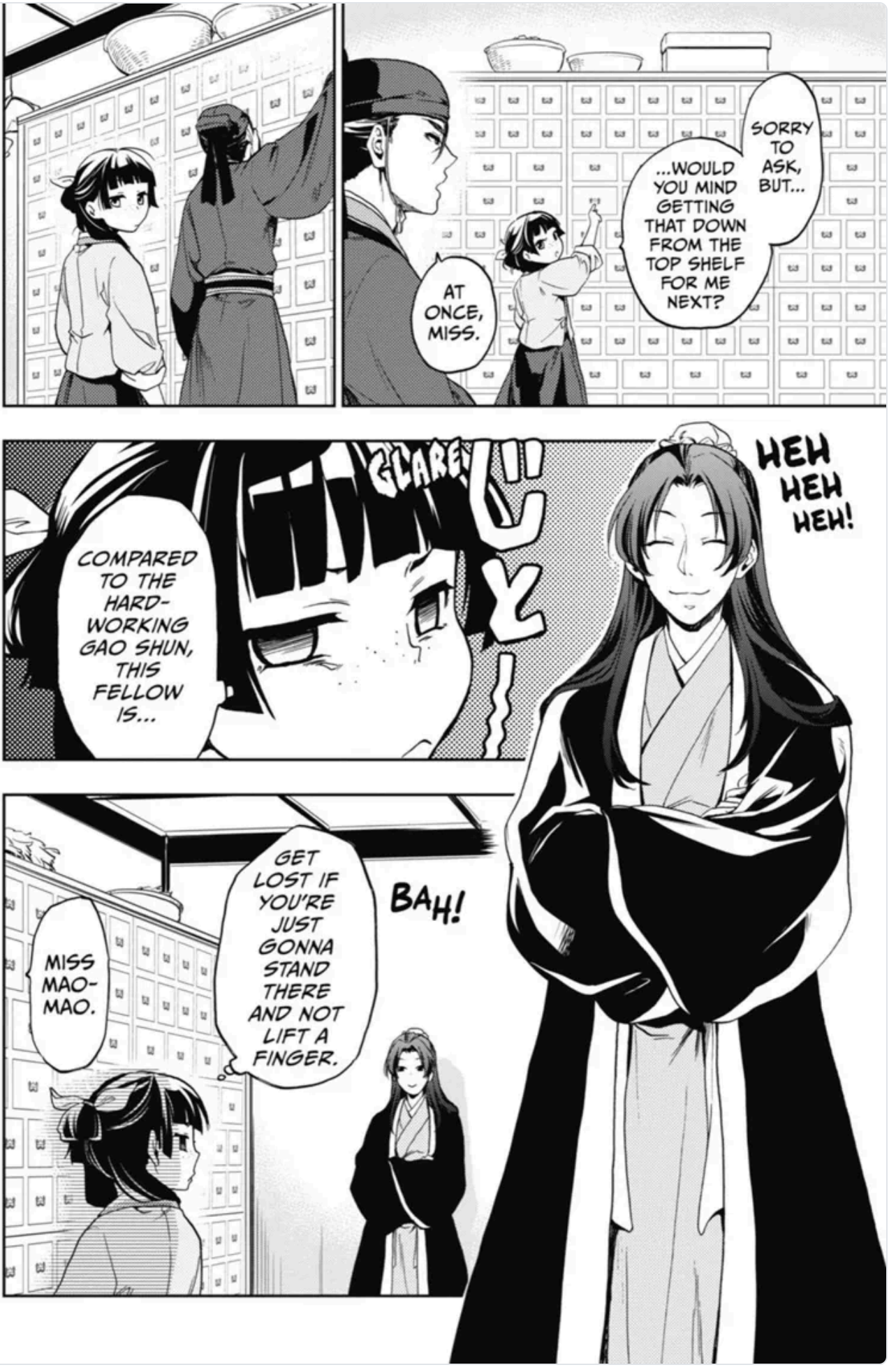
AGHAST
PLEASE DON'T STARE SO INTENSELY AT HOMELY WOMEN.
GUESS HE DOESN'T LIKE HAVING A WOMAN INTRUDING ON HIS TERRITORY.
HOW IMMATURE...
GREEN WITH ENVY

...ARE FREE TO USE WHATEVER YOU WOULD LIKE FROM HERE.
I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT YOU...

アアアアGLOW
97

IS THAT DANCE PART OF A CURSED RITUAL OR SOME-THING?

...HAVING SUCH AN ABUNDANCE OF PAPER TO WRITE ON FEELS LIKE A LUXURY.
AFTER USING WOOD TABLETS FOR SO LONG...
DAUB
SUGAR
DAUB
LET'S SEE... FOR AN APHRO-DISIAC ...
...I'LL ALSO NEED ...
OH!


SORRY TO ASK, BUT...
...WOULD YOU MIND GETTING THAT DOWN FROM THE TOP SHELF FOR ME NEXT?
AT ONCE, MISS.
HEH HEH HEH!
GLARE
COMPARED TO THE HARD-WORKING GAO SHUN, THIS FELLOW IS...
BAH!
GET LOST IF YOU'RE JUST GONNA STAND THERE AND NOT LIFT A FINGER.
MISS MAO-MAO.

IS THIS THE RIGHT ONE?
YES, THANK YOU.
SWISH
すっ
..... OR NOT. THIS ISN'T NEARLY ENOUGH.
ちょろーん
WITH THIS, I SHOULD BE ABLE TO COMPLETE THE—
BARE
WHAT IS THIS CALLED?
SNIFF
SNIFF
IT LOOKS LIKE AN APRICOT SEED...
...BUT HAS A VERY PARTICULAR SMELL.

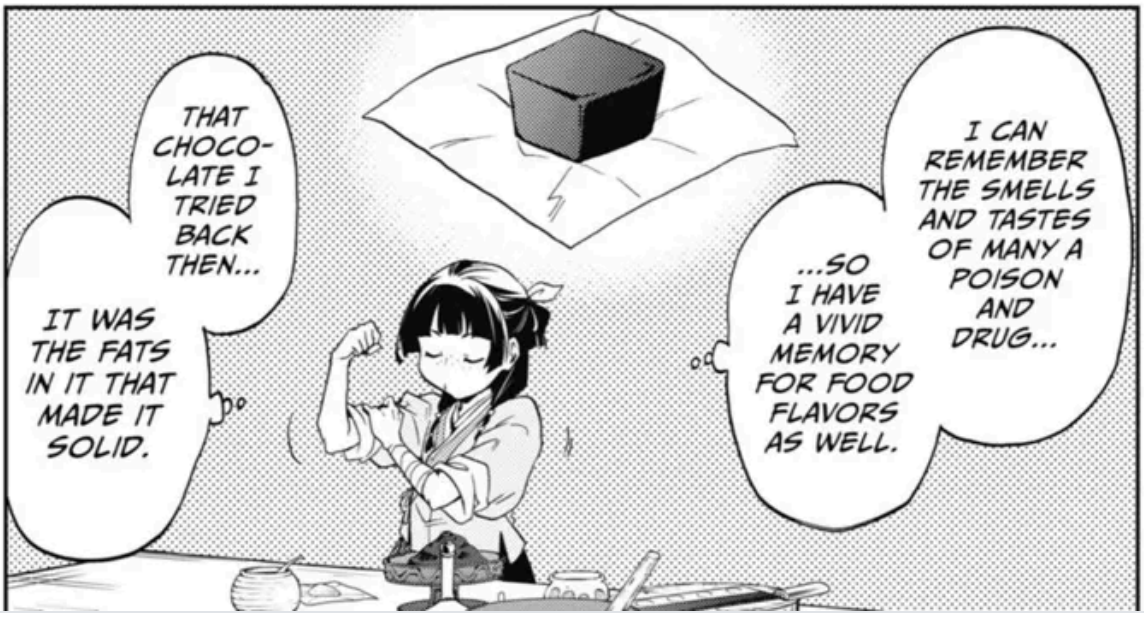
IT'S CALLED CACAO.
IT HAILS FROM ...
...THE SOUTHERN LANDS OF THE FAR WEST.
IF YOU NEED MORE THAN THIS...
...WE'LL SIMPLY HAVE TO PROCURE IT.
I'M SURE WE CAN FIND A MERCHANT WITH SOME ON HAND.

SPIRITS.
MILK.
BUTTER.
SUGAR.
HONEY.
DRIED FRUITS... AND FRAGRANT HERB OIL.
GET BACK TO WORK!
EEEEEEK!
WAAAH! WE'RE SORRY!
ゴゴゴゴ
RUUUMBLE
AND WHAT MIGHT YOU LADIES BE DOING HERE?
WHAT IN THE WORLD IS SHE GOING TO MAKE?
WHISPER
SHE'S USING ONLY THE MOST EXPENSIVE INGRE-DIENTS.
IS SHE MAKING A SNACK?!

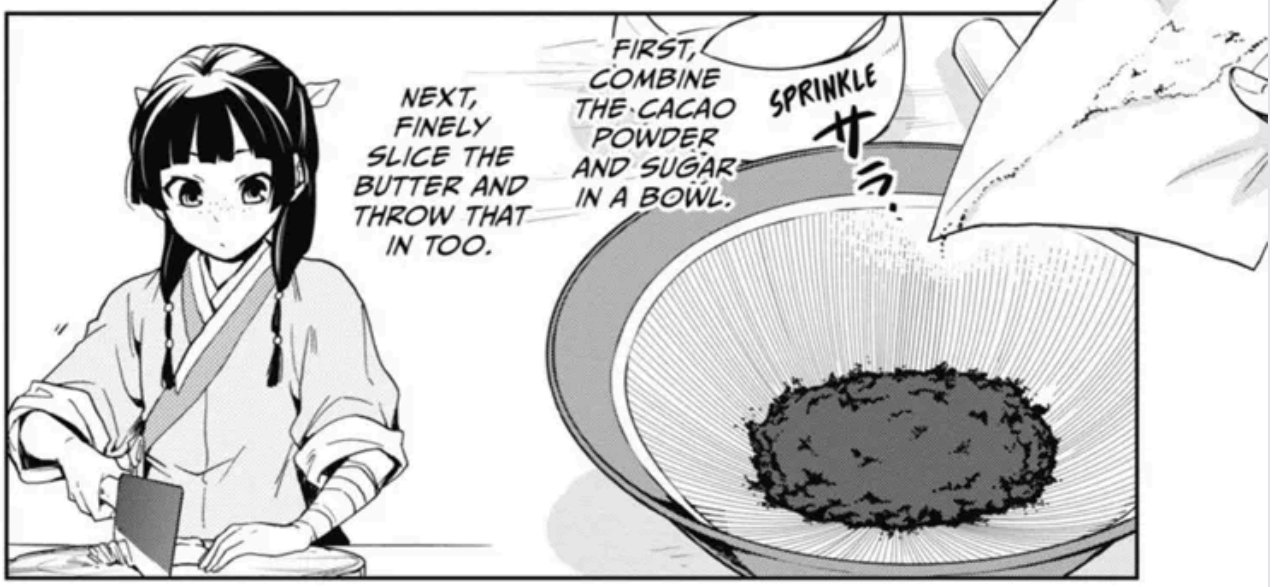
HEAPED
もり
THIS SHOULD BE MORE THAN ENOUGH.
SPRINKLE サラ
SPRINKLE サラ
I SUPPOSE POW-DERED CACAO WAS ALL THEY COULD GET.
YOU MUST TRY ONE TOO, MAOMAO! ♡
I RECEIVED THE RAREST OF TREATS FROM ONE OF MY CLIENTS TODAY.
I'VE TASTED CACAO ONLY ONCE BEFORE.
Lick
WELL, WHAT DO YOU THINK?
DO YOU LIKE IT?
HAZY ぼや
IT'S CALLED "CHOCO-LATE."

DOPEY
ぽやぁ～～
MAO-MAO ?!
AHHH!
HUH? MAO-MAO?

...SO I'VE NEVER HAD CAUSE TO USE IT IN MY FORMULAS BEFORE.
...BUT IT'S AN EXPENSIVE PRODUCT THAT HAS LITTLE PLACE IN A PLEASURE DISTRICT APOTHE-CARY...
YOU'RE BANNED FROM COMING HERE EVER AGAIN!
NOOOOO!
...DID YOU GIVE ME?!
WHAT IN THE WORLD...
WE LATER LEARNED THAT A MERCHANT WAS SELLING IT AS AN APHRO-DISIAC...


THAT CHOCO-LATE I TRIED BACK THEN...
IT WAS THE FATS IN IT THAT MADE IT SOLID.
...SO I HAVE A VIVID MEMORY FOR FOOD FLAVORS AS WELL.
I CAN REMEMBER THE SMELLS AND TASTES OF MANY A POISON AND DRUG...

NOW...
...LET'S MAKE US AN APHRO-DISIAC!


FIRST, COMBINE THE CACAO POWDER AND SUGAR IN A BOWL.
SPRINKLE
NEXT, FINELY SLICE THE BUTTER AND THROW THAT IN TOO.

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HEAT THE BOWL OVER WARM WATER...
STIR
STIR
STIR
STIR
...STIRRING THE MIXTURE CONSTANTLY UNTIL IT BECOMES SMOOTH.
THEN...
...ADD THE MILK, HONEY, AND LIQUOR...
GLUG
GLUG
GLUG
...ADJUSTING FOR YOUR PREFERRED TEXTURE AND FLAVOR.
LAST, ADD THE HERB OIL FOR FRAGRANCE AND FLAVOR, MIX WELL, AND YOU'VE GOT YOUR BASE.
GOOEY
TASTES ABOUT RIGHT.

LOOK きょろ
LOOK きょろ
NOW, SOME ICE SHOULD BE PERFECT FOR HARDENING IT, BUT...
...FINDING THAT IN THE HEIGHT OF SUMMER IS UNLIKELY.
IN WHICH CASE, I GUESS...
TAK
...THAT WILL HAVE TO DO.
NICE AND COOL
THIS TEMPERATURE SHOULD BE JUST RIGHT FOR SOLIDIFYING THE FATS.
COLD
FILL A WATER JUG MADE OF UNGLAZED POTTERY HALFWAY.
CLOSE IT WITH A LID, AND AS THE WATER WITHIN EVAPORATES, THE INSIDE OF THE JUG WILL GROW COLDER THAN THE TEMPERATURE OUTSIDE IT.

FINELY CHOP THE DRIED FRUITS, THEN DIP THEM IN THE CHOCOLATE.
PLOP ちゃぽ
LINE THE PIECES UP ON A PLATE, THEN FLOAT THE PLATE ON THE SURFACE OF THE WATER IN THE JUG.
PLOP ちゃぽ
PUT ON THE LID, COVERING IT WITH A WOVEN STRAW MAT.
...AND NOW WE WAIT.
WELL ...
...THEY SHOULD BE READY BY THE TIME HE GETS HERE.
PHEW!
THERE'S STILL SOME LEFT OVER.
GUESS I'LL EAT IT LATER.
OH, I'VE GOT AN IDEA.

じ
I'LL CUT BREAD INTO CUBES...
わあ、SOAK
...TO SOP UP THE LEFTOVER CHOCOLATE.
I THINK I CAN SKIP THE COOLING THIS WAY...
NOW...
...GUESS I'D BETTER SEE TO THE WASHING-UP.
MIND TAKING THIS TOO?
DOING SOME DISHES?
THERE'S HERBS GROWING HERE?
OOH!
AND HERE TOO!
OOH!

GASP
WHOOPS, I GOT CARRIED AWAY...
CAAAW カー
CAAAW カー
I'D BETTER GET BACK QUICK.
TMP たっ
TMP たっ
SHOVE ばっ
I'VE GOT A REALLY BAD FEELING ABOUT THIS!

111

SIGH

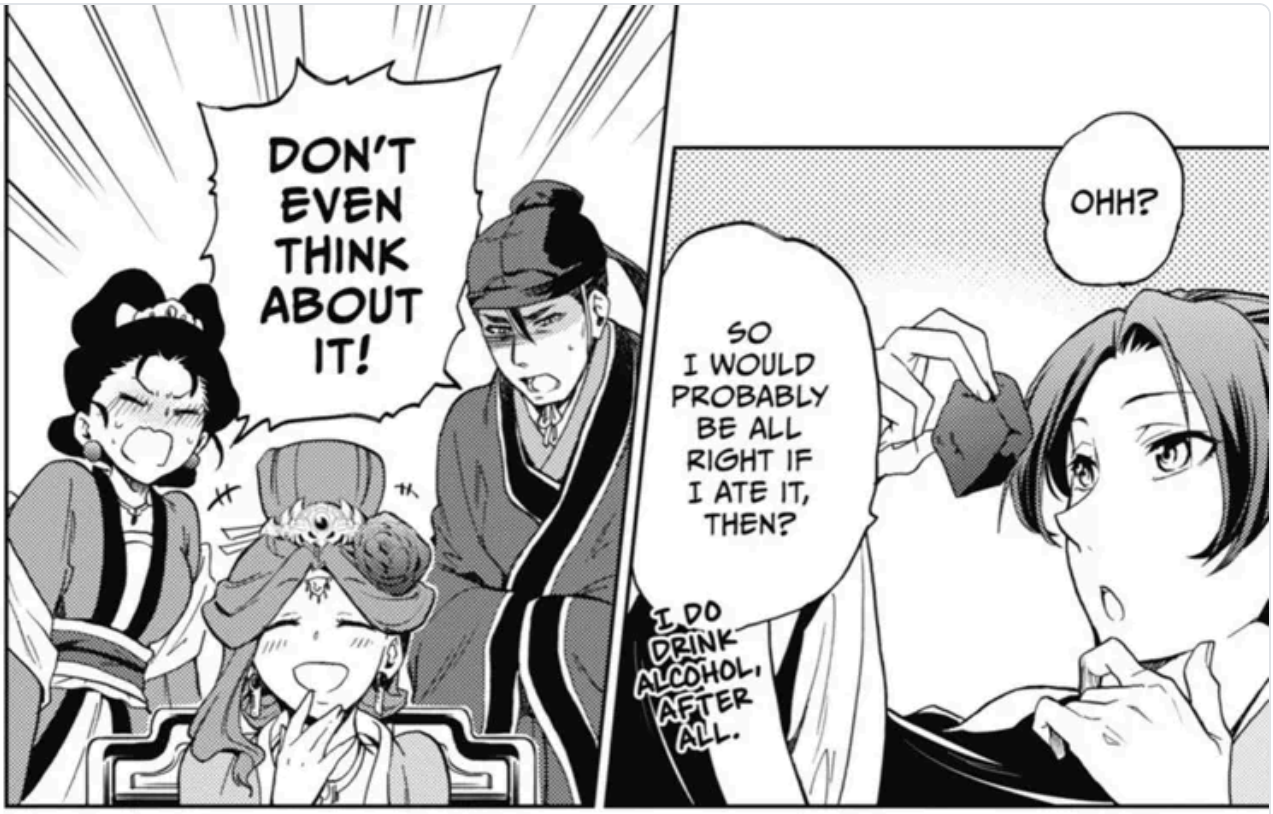
WELL, AT THE VERY LEAST...
...WE KNOW THAT IT WORKS.
HEY!
WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?!
RUMBLE
RUMBLE
RUMBLE
RUMBLE
RUMBLE

UH, WELL, YOU CAN ASK ME ALL YOU LIKE, BUT...
FWIP
REACH
114

SMACK
OW!
IT'S FINE. THEY DIDN'T GO ALL THE WAY.
OOOF...
OHH ...
LOOKS LIKE THEY MUST'VE MISTAKEN THESE FOR SNACKS.

IT LOOKS LIKE BLACK BREAD...
IS THIS THE APHRODI-SIAC?
NO.
SHWIP
シュル
THESE ARE.

THEN WHAT ARE THESE FOR?
MY LATE-NIGHT SNACK.
KRAKOOM
I'VE BUILT UP A TOLERANCE FOR ALCOHOL AND STIMULANTS...
BLUNT
...SO THEY DON'T DO TOO MUCH TO ME.
ALCOHOL CAN BE CATEGORIZED AS A TYPE OF MEDICINE.
THE MORE SENSITIVE A PERSON IS TO A PARTICULAR DRUG, THE GREATER ITS IMPACT.
EVEN THIS BREAD, WHICH QUALIFIES AS AN APHRODISIAC HERE...
...WOULD HAVE LITTLE EFFECT ON THE PEOPLE WHERE CACAO COMES FROM, I SHOULD THINK.


DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!
OHH?
SO I WOULD PROBABLY BE ALL RIGHT IF I ATE IT, THEN?
I DO DRINK ALCOHOL, AFTER ALL.

WHAT AN OUTRAGEOUS THING TO SAY IN FRONT OF THE EMPEROR'S FAVORITE...
UGH...
HA HA HA!
I WAS ONLY KIDDING!

GLANCE
IF HE...

...WITH THOSE LOOKS...
...WERE TO COME ON TO SOMEONE WITH A BLUSH ON HIS FACE...
WHOO
OOA!
...I'M SURE IT WOULD BE ENOUGH TO MAKE ANYONE LOSE THEIR HEAD, MAN OR WOMAN.
I SUPPOSE BEING SO GRATUITOUSLY BLESSED WITH BEAUTY IS ITS OWN KIND OF PROBLEM.
OH MYYY!
すっ SWISH
IT'S QUITE EFFECTIVE, SO PLEASE ONLY EAT ONE PIECE AT A TIME.
INGEST TOO MANY, AND THE INCREASED BLOOD FLOW WILL CAUSE A NOSEBLEED.
A WARNING ABOUT THE APHRODI-SIAC...

PERHAPS I'LL JUST STICK TO THE USUAL...
SHUDDER
.....
I BELIEVE THIS IS THREE TIMES STRONGER THAN THE USUAL INVIGORANT YOU GIVE HIM.
TO SPICE THINGS UP, YOU KNOW!
IF THEY WORK AS WELL AS YOU SAY, PERHAPS I SHOULD HAVE YOU MAKE ME SOME FOR THE EMPEROR.
HEE HEE HEE!
THREE TIMES ...?
WITH THAT SAID...
...PLEASE MAKE USE OF THESE IN PRIVATE, WHEN ALONE WITH AN INTENDED PARTNER.
WILL YOU TAKE YOUR LEAVE?
すっ
SHP
YES.
VERY WELL.

EXCUSE US!
WE'LL DO THE SAME, THEN.
SWF
PHEW!
GLAD THAT'S FINALLY OVER.
FWSH

MY THANKS...
...FOR GOING TO ALL THAT TROU-BLE.

WHIP

OH.
NOW I SEE WHAT YOU WERE AFTER.

...WELL, JUST AS LONG AS NO ONE GETS HURT.